

Red Christmas

By JOHN McKENNA



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Behind a door marked "Managing Director," S. Claus of Claus International Inc., Toy and Novelty Manufacturers and Wholesale Distributors, was engrossed in his export order book.

He stabbed at a bell-push on his desk with a plump, red forefinger. An elfin figure with pointed ears and heavy horn-rimmed spectacles scurried into the office. "Sir?" it queried.

"See here," said S. Claus, "who in the name of Christmas is Ivan Ivanovitch Grodnodski of Rzhnev? And what does he mean putting through an order for one junior spaceman's suit and one gamma ray disintegrator pistol? I can't find him listed anywhere as an accredited retailer."

The elf shuffled his feet. "Sir, he isn't, sir," he said.

S. Claus's beard bristled. "What do you mean 'he isn't'?"

"Just that, Mr. Claus, sir. He isn't an accredited retailer."

"Then, what, d e m a n d e d S. Claus in an ominous whisper, "is he?"

"I think he's a schoolboy, Mr. Claus, sir."

S. Claus exploded. "Look here, Grogbslossom, you've been here long enough to know that Claus International Inc. (he pronounced that in capitals, all but the "Inc.") deals only with the trade."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Claus, sir. But you see Rzhnev is in Russia . . ."

S. Claus's normally ruddy complexion turned the colour of crustied port. "Russia," he said in a husky little voice just like that. "Russia . . . RUSSIA!" He tried the word out for size, but didn't seem to like it any better.

"Grogbslossom!" he thundered, "don't you know that this concern has no dealings with these . . . these . . . these . . . people?"

"Don't you know that they called me a deviationist myth of the capitalist bloodsuckers? Don't you know that . . . eh? Eh?"

Grogbslossom quailed.

"Anyway," S. Claus went on in a quieter tone, "there's all this business of embargoes and exchange difficulties and import restrictions."

He drummed his fingers on the desk and stared at the scrap of paper torn from an exercise book on which Ivan Ivanovitch Grodnodski of Rzhnev had written in big, rounded Russian capitals his request for a junior spaceman's suit and a gamma ray disintegrator pistol.

A nervous little cough broke his reverie and from under eyebrows the lead vermilion he looked up at Grogbslossom.

"You still here?"

"Yes, Mr. Claus, sir."

"Well . . ."

"Shall I write to Ivan Ivanovitch Grodnodski and tell him we're sorry but . . ."

There was a long pause.

S. Claus brought his great red fist down on the desk with a resounding thump.

"No," he said in a hoarse whisper.

Then he broke into a laugh which seemed to grow on him like an express train roaring out of the distance.

The massive desk tipped over in front of him and S. Claus rolled helplessly on the ground.

When he recovered himself he looked hard at the elf.

"You may go, Grogbslossom," he said curtly.

Georgi Ivanovitchsky of the Customs Service sat and shivered. He looked up from his pile of customs invoices. "Christmas Eve," he said simply.

Vassili Vorislov raised his eyebrows.

"What?" he said.

"Christmas Eve," Georgi repeated with a very glance at the thermometer outside the window. It read 52 degrees below zero — Fahrenheit.

Vassili snorted. "Bourgeois idiot," he said. "I suppose you'll be looking for Santa Claus next."

Georgi grinned and got up from his desk. "Light out there," he said. "Looks like a customer — pardon me, comrade, like a citizen — waiting to be served."

A giant sleigh had pulled up outside. The light came from one of the eight reindeer — a smug looking reindeer with a vast red nose.

Georgi opened his book and began to write. "One sleigh, eight reindeer, five elves and one . . ."

He left the space blank.

"Yes, comrade," he said politely. "Anything to declare?"

"One junior spaceman's suit and one gamma ray disintegrator," Georgi repeated. "That was disintegrator, you said? Never can get used to the labels on this stuff the M.V.D. orders."

"And who's it for? Ivan Grodnodski, Rzhnev? I'm afraid I'll have to check that against the official list later, comrade."

"Meanwhile you're papers please."

"What? You haven't got any. Say you don't need any. Most irregular, comrade. Of course, I understand that with this kind of shipment unusual carriers are often employed. But I'll have to check."

"Name?"

Georgi's eyes opened with wonder. But he wrote "S. Claus" dutifully on the form.

He thought for a moment and then he decided that the space where he had been tempted to write "man" on the inventory had better be left blank.

"Just wait a moment, will you, comrade?" he asked. "I really must check all this with Comrade Vorislov."

Inside, Vassili read through the form and snorted again. Georgi sometimes thought it was the only reaction he had left.

He went to the shelf and took down the massive "S" volume of the "People's Guide to Reactionary Myths and Misleading Deviationist Fiction (Including a Full Guide to Capitalist Hyenas)."

"S. Claus," he read in a low measured tone. "A deviationist myth of the capitalist system, a non-existent person usually extensively by capitalist hyenas to . . ."

He stopped. "Non-existent," he said. "That's the point."

"Ipanvotchsky," he roared. "You know there's no provision in the constitution for the admission of non-existent persons to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."

"What do they teach you young idiots at bureaucrats' school these days?"

"Come to think of it," he added in a quaking whisper, "there's no provision for NOT admitting non-existent persons to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, either."

"Give me the telephone."

In Moscow, Stepan Serionov had gone to bed.

He was trying hard to drive deviationist images of plum puddings out of his mind.

The clattering telephone brought him wearily to his feet.

"S. Serionov, People's Commissar of Noxious Substances," he said mechanically into the telephone.

A few seconds later, he was wide awake.

"What's that? You say you have . . ."

"But, idiot, of course you can't have. No non-existent persons have ever been ruled officially to be noxious entities. I'll have it taken up by the committee if you like. They meet in April."

"No, you can't arrest a non-existent person and send him to Siberia. I'm quite sure there's no transport schedule for non-existent goods. That's the Transport Division (Miscellaneous Hyenas Section) you want. If you're contemplating any such action, anyhow."

"Goodnight, I'll have the operator transfer you to them if you like."

And so it went. From the Transport Division (Miscellaneous Hyenas Section) to the People's Police (Deviationist Ailens Section) to the

Ministry of Myths (Bourgeois Reactionary, Peoples Ruin for the In-citing of Section) and so on and on.

The Transport people said that non-existent hyenas couldn't need transport. The police said that non-existent persons couldn't legally occupy space in the cells. The Ministry of Myths said they only recorded myths, they couldn't arrest them.

Wearily, Vassili stamped S. Claus's forms and let him through.

He had at least got one clear decision from all the ministries. S. Claus was non-existent and everything he had with him — "All normal trapping of the myth," the Myth people assured him — must be non-existent, too.

He devoutly hoped that Ivan Ivanovitch Grodnodski was pretty high up in the M.V.D.

It was barely dawn when the cheerful bald-pated little man who was the Commissar of all Commissars — and who called himself Bulganushev just to create a little confusion among his front men — got to his desk.

Already the telegrams and the phone messages had begun to pour in as the massive correspondence rejected the massive correspondence about Ivan Ivanovitch Grodnodski.

The Commissar of all Commissars read it quickly and picked up the bright red telephone on his desk. He waited until everyone was clearly out of earshot. Then he dialled a secret number.

In the managing director's office of S. Claus International Inc., S. Claus sat and waited.

Grogbslossom came in trembling. "A Mr. Bulganushev on the telephone," he said. "He says it's urgent. Very urgent. Most urgent."

Children's Christmas

Do let the children have fun and enjoyment on their own day.

You'd better be prepared for the fact that two and three-year-olds are not at all likely to rush for their packages or to open one after another with wild delight.

The four and five-year-olds may do it that way, but even they're likely to become absorbed in some one thing, and stop to play with it before going to the next package.

Some children, of course, do get so excited that they'll rush from one package to another fast to satisfy the usually impatient adult. But most, if left to themselves, do it their own way, stopping and investigating as they go.

If there's a baby too young to open his own things, the waiting parents can have some of their fun opening his packages for him. But if a child is old enough to unwrap his own, let him have the fun and the time to enjoy doing it.

You have to be prepared for possible disappointments too. The doll that has been so carefully dressed may immediately have her clothes ripped off. Doll clothes are only in the way for two and three-year-olds, and even for some four and five-year-olds.

Knowing that it's better to provide a few strips of gaycoloured cloth to wrap the doll in, saving the time it takes to make the clothes until a later day.

Don't be surprised either if some simple little gift is more appreciated than an elaborate one. Or if a child turns from his new toy to an old one.

It takes time for some youngsters to get used to new things. And they'll have a happier Christmas if you remember that Santa Claus belongs to them.

There are two Christmas Islands. One is an atoll in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. The other is a British possession in the Indian Ocean.

On Christmas Day . . . repeat the old familiar greeting that, each year, in some mystic way rings fresh and true—"Merry Christmas!"

Like such words as "hello" and "good-by," there really isn't anything else to say that pulls at our heartstrings as do these old dear words. And so again we say:

Merry Christmas—to the littlest ones who skip downstairs in the gray dawn to explore their stockings and the wondrous tree and to look at Christmas with the special radiance of youth . . . who lend to the rest of us little glimmers of the real Christmas glamour.

Merry Christmas—to father who'll strain a point any day to give us all the things we want . . . who probably works much too hard and yet keeps younger and more alert because of the responsibility of a family and the competition of business . . . who makes the gesture of tut-tutting all the fuss and feathers yet beams with affection and excitement.

Merry Christmas—to mother who really calls the tune for the holidays and does the planning and pulling together . . . who flutters and bustles radiantly for weeks ahead and undoubtedly has the best and busiest time of all.

Merry Christmas—to the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker, not to mention all those who sold us shoes and ships and sealing wax . . . for what would Christmas be without them? For through them we've all been able to share our own little prosperity in the most wholesome way of all—by spending it.

Merry Christmas—to dear friends far and near who've sent us greetings and gifts . . . most especially do we cherish the greetings they cause even more than gifts they express the true spirit of Christmas.

Merry Christmas—to the droppers-in who come with holiday cheer and friendship . . . who came to our parties or stop by to leave a glass of extra elegant jelly or an original privately invented relish.

Merry Christmas—to ourselves, for that matter. But then we feel pretty sure that we'll have no for we've put so much work and excitement and loving get-together into it. For of course we all get out of Christmas just about what we put in.

Wearily, Mr. Bulganushev called his secretary.

"Take a note for Pravda," he said. "And for the Soviet Encyclopedia. And for the People's Guide to Reactionary Myths and Deviationist Fiction (Including a Full Guide to Capitalist Hyenas)."

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Away In A Manger

The Stable of Bethlehem did not in any way resemble the airy porticos—complete with plaster of paris animals and adoring shepherds—so dear to the heart of modern Christendom.

With comfort increasing throughout the western world, the poverty of the Nativity scene simultaneously startles and fascinates us—as perhaps Matthew, the publican, was impressed by the story of the Wise Men; and St. Luke, who had been a ship's doctor and probably knew very little about shepherds, was charmed by the shepherds abiding in the field.

There was no room in the inn that night so Jesus was born in a stable; a place of shelter heven into a rocky ledge of the Judean countryside. It was cold and dark and damp, and Judean travelers—frequently "put up" in such caves—welcomed rather than disdained joint tenancy with beasts because the breath of the cattle and the heat of their bodies provided a little warmth, while the guests inside the inn had no heat at all.

The cave, which was the birthplace of the Saviour, is now a grotto beneath Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity; and though fascinated by the simplicity of the original Nativity scene, Christianity has been unwilling to maintain its poverty and has covered the entire surface with costly ornamentation.

The Armenian church observes Christmas on January 6; the Dutch on December 6; the French have their own particular Christmas observances, as have the Germans.

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Merry Christmas

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